



# Small region, big flavour

Jura wines owe their unique character to a distinctive salty tang

**Y**ou can hardly get further from the coast in France than the Jura region, nudging up to the Alps. Yet there seems to be something of the sea in the wines – and not only those which, like fino and manzanilla sherries, mature for years under a protective layer of natural yeast.

Those unique wines – Jura's famed but rare vin jaune – have a distinctly salty tang. But so too do more straightforward wines made from chardonnay, whose vines far outnumber those of the local savagnin. Perhaps it's something in the soil – after all, one of the region's few largish towns, Salins-les-Bains, is known for its salt mines.

Whatever exactly is responsible for the salinity, the bottles from France's smallest wine region justify that much-overused description, unique. More than that, they are very good, though the cost reflects their quality. But with any luck, the experience of them should grow here, to judge by the large and enthusiastic wine trade presence when the vignerons came to London last month to present their first-ever group tasting in the UK.

They seem a happy lot – I heard more laughter than I've experienced at any tasting for years. And the tasters wore broad smiles, too, such was the pleasure and interest of the wines poured.

Within that very small area, a narrow band running for barely 80 kilometres parallel with the Swiss border, the whole gamut of wine styles is made, from fizz through table wine to sweetly fortified. Five grape varieties are planted – chardonnay and pinot noir, as in neighbouring



■ Jura wines are as pretty as the place

Picture: Vins du Jura

Burgundy (though on very different soils), plus Jura natives, white savagnin and reds poulsard and trousseau.

Savagnin has no known near viniferous relative, and is the only variety allowed in vin jaune. So how is that wine made? The clue is in the name. Vin jaune is an oxidative style, anathema to ultra-reductive winemakers who chase away oxygen by every possible means. The wine is left to mature for six years in not-quite-full old barrels, where a thin layer of yeast grows on the exposed surface, protecting the wine but also influencing its scent and flavour in a breadly, nutty, dry-sherry way.

## Tempting

Purists allow the yeast to develop naturally. "It's in the barrels, in the cellar," Alain Baud of Domaine Baud Père et Fils told me. Baud wines were the first I tasted, a lovely introduction to the region. The crémant is a fine fizz, and the reds quite unlike heavyweights from hotter climes. Poulsard is as pale as some rosés, trousseau somewhat sturdier, but both make tempting summer wines, cool with charcuterie.

The Baud yeast-aged Château-Chalon 2005 has all the jaune character, lingering long. "It

will age for 100 years," said Alain, describing the oldest he'd ever tasted – from 1856 – as "overwhelming". But his Cuvée Tradition 2008 blend of half-and-half savagnin and chardonnay, with three years' big-barrel ageing, is a fascinating, less exacting, well-priced starter.

As yet, the Baud family's lovely wines aren't on sale here. Hope isn't lost, though. The Sampler (Islington and South Kensington) has three from Domaine Badoz – delicate, attractive chardonnay Les Rossots 2011 (£15.80), another chardonnay aged in big barrels, Arrogance 2011 (£18.40), and Vin Jaune 2006 in the traditional 62cl bottle (£38).

Newly into Roberson (Kensington) are two very good wines from Berthet-Bondet, a 2011 chardonnay (£17) and Château-Chalon 2006 (£45). I just hope they're soon joined by the youthful savagnin Nature and two-years-in-fut Tradition (around £17-£20).

Fine wines from Caves Jean Burdy are imported by Dudley Craig Wines (020 7036 9696), including Côtes du Jura savagnin 2008 (£23) with no yeast-ageing but a very singular saltiness, and the splendid Château-Chalon 2005 (£57).

# Seeking to join the clubs or just to trap tourists?

The Reform Social & Grill claims to take inspiration from classic private-members' establishments but doesn't come close

**G**entlemen's clubs are sometimes much parodied and jeered, most often by people who either have never so much as entered so august an establishment, or else are simply aching to be a member of one. Although the detail of old established clubs varies infinitely, the bedrock of the notion remains the same: an agreeable place to meet and eat with persons who are by no means clones, but do share a broadly similar outlook on life and leisure. Ages of members vary, though by definition election to one of the more prestigious will generally be accorded to a person who has attained a degree of eminence. But we have all seen so many (often American) films that depict a lounge the size of a ballroom, the deep buttoned

leather armchairs filled with perfectly ancient men, some of whom may well have passed away unnoticed – and should anyone so much as rustle a newspaper, he is treated to mutely furious glares of censure. And then there is the abiding controversy over the few remaining clubs that still are "gentlemen only". The wiser woman will not care a jot about this, because she has better things to think about and many other places to be – but to a hard core of vituperative types, this continues to rankle. It is not that they particularly want to be members – they simply cannot tolerate the fact that they are disallowed (while always extremely welcome as guests). The attitude is hardly new – you just have to look at how Eve reacted when confronted with something forbidden (and where

“The goaty thing did indeed look like a pudding: the melted cheese very custardy in appearance, the zigzag of balsamic seemingly chocolate. Jon liked it, but said: 'I can't find any leak. I like leek. I only ordered it for the leek.'”

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■ Joseph with Jon Riley at the Reform Social & Grill

Picture: Polly Hancock

that got us all).

Some clubs can be rather dull, it is true (though no-one would care to be a member of), and I have seen gentlemen in such places playing to type and rebuking some unfortunate for having offended in some or other unfathomable manner. The waiter where I was lunching the other week would not have gone down at all well: it was nothing he said or did ... but his shoes were squeaky. No – it was more than squeaky ... they were actually creaking with almost pantomime volume, as might those of Norman Wisdom in a public library. I only mention all of this because the restaurant in Marylebone is

called Reform Social & Grill, and according to its own puffery, it “brings a quintessentially British experience to the Mandeville Hotel, taking inspiration from classic British gentlemen’s clubs”. Which I found intriguing: are they really striving to do this? Or is it all just some PR sop to tourists who maybe are hoping that the Duke of Edinburgh dines there daily, and the waiters are all called Jeeves?

#### Lack of street presence

It suffers from the same lack of street presence that nearly all restaurants attached to a hotel will do: there is a separate porticoed entrance, but without a proper

frontage, people will still pass on by. The foyer of the hotel is elegant and just a bit ritzy, and this leads into a generous casual eating area with a long zinc-topped bar which in turn gives way to the restaurant proper. First impressions are perfectly OK – terracotta and white painted brick, polished walnut floor, decent Victorian dining chairs and a spattering of bentwood, bare tables of either mahogany or white marble, a lowish ceiling alive with recessed downlights ... but none of this have I ever seen in a gentlemen’s club. Nor have I been aware of The Animals’ greatest hits on the sound system (or, indeed, a sound system). The sole nod in the

direction of club furnishings is in the form of a few red buttoned leather booths: but red buttoned leather does not a club make.

The service is friendly, competent, and wearing creaky shoes. The menu – though a horrible large board of a thing – is full of very enticing quality and seemingly proper British grub. I was there for lunch with Jon Riley, my very good friend and editor at the publisher Quercus: he used to be my editor at Faber and Faber, so obviously a man who refuses to learn from the folly of his ways. Very few other tables were taken (it’s something of a secret in otherwise bustling Marylebone) though directly behind us were an Australian couple who wanted, they explained to the waiter, any wine at all, don’t care, so long as it is “rid”. Three different breads are offered (and served with tongs) while the butter on the table is naked and unadorned, quite as it should be – the unwrapping of little foil-covered buggers really having no place at table.

#### Flavoursome pink chunks

Jon was opening with Welsh leek and goat’s cheese ... not tart, no – but “pudding”. And I was having duck Scotch egg with roast apple sauce. We waited rather a while for these – but that was OK, because we had a book to talk about. The goaty thing did indeed look like a pudding: the melted cheese very custardy in appearance, the zigzag of balsamic seemingly chocolate. He liked it, but said: “I can’t actually find any leek. I like leek. I only ordered it for the leek.” Oh dear. My Scotch egg was pretty good – the yolk just gooey, the sausage meat actually ground black pudding, the breadcrumb coating golden and crunchy (though the apple sauce too sweet). And after that, we were going for chops: English Dexter rose veal in Jon’s case, with roast bone marrow – and for me, Blythburgh pork with, er ... macaroni cheese. I know: weird, right? But we’ll give it a go, shall we? Jon’s veal was yards in diameter – he kept on sawing off great flavoursome pink chunks of it, though it got no smaller: he

finished it eventually, though – and it was really very good indeed, although the marrow was under roasted, and just a little slimy. My pork too was very fine – but rather too salty, as was Jon’s extra of new potatoes. The other sides – roast cabbage and al dente green beans – were perfect ... and then there was this sweet little ramekin of macaroni cheese. Well ... it was all right, bit bland – but an entirely different dish from the pork: no blend at all – here were two little disparate luncheons, united only by their joint presentation on a bloody slab of slate set into a bloody slab of wood (why can’t I have a plate? Hey? Jon got a plate. Why can’t I have a plate...?).

Neither of us could go a pudding after that little lot – although they too looked good and British, with lashings of custard (“please don’t be afraid to ask for more”) well to the fore. There was also on offer this little gobblet of illiteracy: “All day and night aperitif: it’s never too early or too late it’s an attitude.” Dear God. So anyway ... it’s a good, if slightly pricey, restaurant, this ... but, contrary to its self-professed aspirations, nothing remotely similar to a gentlemen’s club. If that’s what you’re after ... well then you’re just going to have to join the real thing.

■ Joseph Connolly’s latest novel, *England’s Lane*, is published by Quercus as a hardback and ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## FACTFILE

- **REFORM SOCIAL & GRILL**  
Mandeville Hotel, Mandeville Place W1. Tel: 020 7224 1624
- Open daily for breakfast, brunch (weekends only), lunch, tea and dinner.
- Food: ★★★★★☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆
- Cost: Quite pricey, with no set-lunch deal. About £120 for three-course meal for two with wine.

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